

The Golden Cage

Story: The Golden Cage

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Summary: A collection of short stories from a dark future, one where John Connor apparently avoids human contact and has Cameron as his closest confidant. What is she thinking about it? Why is he in isolation? What is a cyborg's memory? What is a top secret cargo that Derek must get during the exchange?

Chapter 1: A cyborg's memory

Disclaimer: like many others, I was disappointed that TSCC ended so abruptly, and was motivated to write a fanfic taking place in this universe (yes, 13 years after the release, ha-ha). I was especially interested in how the show portrayed the future, and there were very few stories here which showed that setting, so I decided to make one.

This is not exactly a finished story, more like a first attempt at showing the atmosphere and feel of the future from which Jesse and Cameron hail out in the show, the one in which John Connor is widely perceived as a distant leader who trusts machines more than humans, with Cameron his closest confidant. It also shows my attempt at figuring out how Cameron's mind might work. Oh yeah, and a chance to parade a dashing Cameron with general's stars. If I ever finish at least one complete story, it will deal with questions like if John's "distant leadership" really worked out in the end in that war, what he and Cameron thought about it, what their relationship was and why he ultimately sent her back to young John in the show (remember Sarah asking about it in S2?). Feedback welcome!

Warning: some mildly graphic descriptions of injuries and such in the text, and in general this is a story with a darker feel than most. This is deliberate, and for two reasons: one, post-Judgement day future is not a nice one; and two, I believe most writers here miss the horror integral to all terminators, even the best-behaved ones, which always was an integral part of original Terminator films. These things are not human and never will be, this is not good or bad, this is just how they are, and even if Cameron experienced something that we may call love, it was different for her and she processed it differently than we would do. Trying to tone it all down and turning her into another happy-go-girlfriend with no hidden levers, no weirdness and no scariness undermines the whole point of TSCC and makes it boring, IMO.

Now, onto the text:

A cyborg's memory works differently from human one. Human memory is a fuzzy, blurry, unstable thing, with alcohol, drugs and sleep destroying parts of it unpredictably, new memories overshadowing old ones, old memories fading away into inexistence or morphing when we recall them. On the other hand, cyborg memory is clear, precise and unchanging, old memories coexisting with new, every single detail, every gesture and every smell remaining as sharp as ever until the manual overwrite by the CPU.

Cameron, walking across the bunker hallway with general stars on her shoulders, could remember every single detail of her relationship with John as if it happened just now. Her first clear memory was of his face, looking down on her, saying "Well, what are we gonna call you, then?". She was not always his silent shadow, his protector – first, like all reprogrammed terminators, she underwent a barrage of grueling tests, served on the frontline, felt his silent stare a thousand times before He, for some unknowable reason, chose her to be a part of his entourage. With nothing to compare to it then, she was content – she could finally execute her mission to protect him, to watch him eat, walk, talk, to fight by his side, to watch him sleep as she guarded the perimeter. With time, they grew ever closer, and she realized just how much he could give her, especially when he finally proved it to her one night that she was a woman on some level beyond the exterior flesh. Cyborg's memory is precise, and she could recall with perfect clarity lying in bed next to him, feeling his heartbeat, his breath, his touch, his pulse, checking his vitals and their cycles with accuracy that she could never hope for before. She was as content (people might say "happy") as she was never before, feeling him, smelling him, touching him, putting it all in her memory banks. She could hardly go back now to be just a guard, a protector, someone watching from afar, having experienced all that, and the next night they shared a bed again – and then the night after that, and the ones after. Her major fear was that she would break one of the innumerable stupid rules and taboos that figured prominently in human relationships and would then be banished, but John was very patient. He explained things to her, he showed her how to be better in her mission, and she did everything to keep up. This was a wondrous time, but cyborg's memory is precise, and she remembered what happened after that, too.

A big tent, flapping in the wind in the cold wasteland of the former United States. John stood on a raised part, making a speech before a combined force of several field commands that would soon drive to the frontlines. It would be a big combined push against the machines, after the speech and the feast and the drinking which accompanied a big mass of unfamiliar people now crowded together. John insisted that she would stay aside, in the distance, not behind or side to side to him like usual, to appease those human purists who disagreed with reprogs ("reprogrammed terminators") being given any prominent role (or existing at all), and she agreed, something which she could never forgive herself for now. One man somehow sneaked a plasma pistol and shot at John Connor right in the middle of the speech, almost at pointblank range. They never did figure out if would-be assassin was a Skynet spy, a disgruntled Resistance member or simply a madman. It didn't matter now. At that range he couldn't miss, and he didn't. Cameron could see it clearly: John's right eye bursting like an egg yolk, his flesh sizzling, his mouth screaming, his body falling down. Every other concern pushed aside, she went into overdrive then, dropping her weapon, launching from her spot at the very limit of her speed, pushing aside people who were in the way so violently that three of them later had to be treated for injuries. As she knelt down before a choking, sizzling remnant of a man with whom she shared a bed the night before and who was her reason for existence, her eyes were hard and unblinking, no hint of tears that would only hinder eye sensors, her hands firm and steady, voice loud and clear as she asked for paramedics, first aid and painkillers; but inside her everything was shattering apart. A terminator without a mission does not exist and should not exist; and while one part of her checked John's vitals and made orders, other part was already calculating how it would be better for her to go out (being publicly shot down by Resistance officers after a trial was the most promising idea at that time: the troops would see what awaited those who fail their orders, like she did, and it might even heal a rift that began forming between factions within Resistance that opposed working with machines and those that supported them). John's survival was unlikely, and she worked out of desperation – one of the few feelings shared by humans, Skynet and cyborgs alike. With violent screaming around her (some arguing that she was in league with assassin and is going to kill John and so should be put down, others shouting that she was his only hope), she crouched to him, checking his vitals, shouting orders and desperately hoping that he would survive. The Resistance nearly fell that day, yet in the end sanity prevailed and order was restored. Somehow John survived, and in the bunker hospital they managed to stabilize him.

Cameron never left his side for a moment, and never would for months of tortuously slow recovery that followed. Skynet tried to attack then, sensing a weakness, but human commanders once again proved themselves capable and drove all major attacks back, even launching a few of their own. The Resistance hold on without John Connor in an active role, at least for a while. Cameron didn't really care about any of that – she stayed with immobile John, never letting anyone else get close, listening to doctors through loudspeaker and executing their commands with surgical precision, feeding him, cleaning his toilet, washing him, wiping out his vomit and cleaning his clothes when his stomach violently disagreed with food yet again. Machines can't really feel disgust or nausea, and body fluids hold no special significance for them, so Cameron never felt any aversion towards what she was doing. On the contrary – being so close to John, being directly responsible for his wellbeing instead of unpredictable, unstable humans that tried to shoot him and were the alternative made her deeply content. She was completely focused on making John better, and yet that didn't mean she ignored the war – Skynet was a direct and serious threat to them, especially when John couldn't command, and so she made humans bring her a laptop in the room with access to Resistance internal network, being able to now to monitor a course of war and issue orders in John's name without ever leaving his side. There were a lot of disagreements with her orders at first, but many people sensed reason, and slowly most groups accepted her lead to some degree, at least for a while.

When John, against all odds, got better and could be moved, she personally moved him to a secure room in a bunker which she ordered to be made exactly to her specifications, a heavy double door with an array of electronic and magnet locks clicking shut behind them, for the first time in two months getting the Resistance leader out of sight of any human. No one dared to object openly to that move, after all that she did for him in these months, and yet she knew it was in this moment the whispers started that John was dead or replaced by a cyborg, that Cameron herself allied with Skynet to betray human race to the machines. Aided by Greys and Skynet spies in Resistance network, these rumors would only grow in the months to follow, as John slowly recovered in his isolation while Cameron commanded in his name. Cameron knew about the rumors, and knew that they would become a problem, but she also knew one thing – John was a priority. With her relentless help, he recovered, and she was determined not to let anything like this happen to him ever again. When John regained enough control to give orders, his first order was to make Cameron a General and his personal representative with all the rights that this entailed. She was now basically a second-in-command of the Resistance, serving as its first-in-command until John recovered, and able to control the war until he was well enough to return to active duty.

A cyborg's memory is not like the one in humans; it is clear, precise and unchanging, old memories coexisting with new, every single detail, every gesture and every smell remaining as sharp as they were the moment they were experienced. And now, walking down the bunker hallway with five silver stars of a General shining on shoulder straps of a jacket thrown over her form, surrounded by messengers, giving orders, writing what she has heard from messengers on a tablet so John can review it later, calculating the threat level of everyone who passed by, listening to a headset with broadcast from internal Resistance network with one ear and listening devices from John's room with another simultaneously, she could at the same time remember every single detail of the lowest point of her existence. *The flesh sizzling... the smell of a burning meat, rapidly cauterizing... the unsteady, faltering breathing ...*

NO! No. She would never let that happen again. Never again. If she had to slaughter every single living inhabitant of this bunker, metal, man, woman and child, and carry John away from both machines and humans to avoid something like that, she would do it. She would not fail him again. She would not lose him again.

Never again.

Walking down the hallway, surrounded by a flurry of activity, General Cameron (also variously referred to as "Miss Connor", "the Iron Lily", "that little metal bitch", "Connor's pet metal", and Cam – but only by Him) continued along her busy day, never once ceasing to remember – because a cyborg's memory is different, and a cyborg can never fail to remember.

Chapter 2: Tin morning

Disclaimer: This is a second snippet at showing the atmosphere and feel of the future from which Jesse and Cameron hail out in the show, the one in which John Connor is widely perceived as a distant leader who trusts machines more than humans, with Cameron his closest confidant. This one shows the Future John's point of view and should be read after "A cyborg's memory"; my first snippet.

Warning: some mildly graphic descriptions of injuries and such in the text

Now, onto the text:

A single sun ray, travelling millions of miles to Earth, managed to break through permanent cloud cover that covered the once green planet. It travelled to the surface, illuminating ravaged landscape that was once the continental United States. After coming all the way, it managed to go through a bulletproof window and land on a face of the most important person in the world. John Connor, leader of the Human Resistance, General of the united human army, the Chosen One, stirred in his sleep.

Without opening his eye, he smiled as his senses confirmed the familiar picture: the wondrous fragrance of the one person who was the most important to him, her warm, yielding flesh, surrounding his. *Cameron*. She really was one of the kind, he reflected – terminators didn't need to sleep, and they certainly didn't need to ever close their visual sensors, cutting off the most important source of incoming information, especially for prolonged periods. Cameron, however, would lay in bed with him every night until he was deeply asleep, then carefully get out so he wouldn't wake up, go on to her nightly duties and finally return in the morning (guided apparently by some complicated algorithm which calculated the range in which he would wake up that day), check his vitals to determine his condition and the time when he would wake, then shortly before that time undress herself and cautiously sneak in, close to him, pretending to be sleeping (eyes closed and all that) – just so he could wake up next to her peaceful body. And what's more, she apparently enjoyed every moment of that, every day. John tried to imagine himself in that situation, doing that every night for her and never losing the satisfaction, and just couldn't. Women were mysterious in general, but the curious creature lying next to him was one of a kind.

He opened his eye and his smile got wider as he observed the face of an angel nearby. She was pretending to be sleeping, her expression peaceful and serene.

It usually takes 6 to 7 seconds for her to open her eyes when I open mine, let's see...

Cameron stretched, smiled and opened her eyes. "Tin morning," she said to him.

Five-and-a-bit seconds. Hm. That's interesting.

"Tin morning," he replied. She leaned in for a kiss, and he readily obliged. Tin morning – that was their inside joke, something made before his incident, before even they began to share the bed together. To be honest, he didn't remember now how it originated – something about how in their conditions no morning can be good? Something about her being referred to as "a tin can"? Yeah, something like that, probably. Still, she observed the ritual religiously, and he didn't mind.

After she leaned back from the kiss, she carefully touched a side of his face, her expression now radiating concern. "How are you?"

"The face is healing, I think, I just wish I could hurry it a bit. Still, it'll be fine." No, it wouldn't, not really. John knew he should be glad that plasma burst which liquefied nearly half of his face in a fraction of a second left him alive at all, but there was a price for everything. The pain would appear as he went through the day, starting from the itching, intensifying to a dull throbbing, and by the evening becoming a constant irritation, distracting him from doing anything worthwhile. The only time the pain got away was when she was around, for some reason. He knew why she asked, and knew why he had to lie to her – the day would be busy, and as acting General of the Resistance she had many duties, all of which she would drop the instant she sensed she should be with him. Which she absolutely shouldn't. He could get through the day – he knew he would, he did it so many times – and winning the war was more important than any concern she had for him. *Should* be more important, at least, if he actually managed to get her to understand that.

And as for the night... she had to be with him at night, okay, he got that one the hard way. The only night in last year in which she was not with him – when he specifically ordered her away – he had a nightmare about falling into the sun, face-first. The heat was unbearable, and his right eye caught fire, then the right side of his face, then the whole face. He shocked himself awake, screaming and sobbing, in an agony of pain for which he wasn't prepared for. He couldn't do anything – he lay on a bed helplessly, sobbing from pain, curled into a ball, until Cameron, who heard his agony through her listening device from another side of the Bunker, rushed into a room and jumped into bed with him, hugging him with her entire body. Gradually the sobbing stopped, then the pain got away, and at last he was even able to fall back to sleep again. She stayed with him all that night and all next morning, never leaving his side, abandoning all her duties as an acting General to be with him. He was still ashamed of that – the Resistance was more important than his well-being, and her missing probably wrecked a delayed a lot of plans, and all that because of his weakness, but she wouldn't budge on the night issue and, to be honest, he himself couldn't press it. She never left him the following nights, not until he was deeply sleeping, and he had to accept that.

He leaned in to kiss her, to get away from the troubled thoughts, and she leaned in to accept it. The kiss was long, and he sensed that she was more than willing to take things further, but it was morning, and the day was going to be an important one. With a supreme effort of will he managed to break the kiss, but as he moved his face away she let out a soft sigh which almost broke his heart. *What is she doing?* She was acting unusual today, she should know that it is better to leave this stuff to the evening... First the five seconds, and now this...

By now she should have already gotten up, but she continued to stay in bed, playing with her hair, a coy smile on her face. "We have time," she half-whispered, and John couldn't help himself – he found her whisper voice to be so outright sexy, and she knew it, the vixen. She leaned in closer, increasing her apparent breathing, making her cheeks flushed, and he found himself losing control. At times like these, he really wished he could understand what she was thinking about...

His right eye, skin and bone all melted together into a single liquid mass by the force of the plasma blast, dripping to the floor ... the people nearby coughing and vomiting when the smell hit them... she running towards him, knowing she would be late but doing it nevertheless...

Never again.

I failed and he suffers now because of that. His pain now is because I failed then. I must not fail him again.

He lied to me today. He is in pain, and he hid it. He needs that sex to remove the pain; he doesn't know it yet. I will give it to him.

Cameron leaned even closer, still flushed, brought their bodies together and whispered: "John, please... This will be quick if you want, I promise."

John was so surprised by this open plea that he found himself unable to resist. As a cyborg, a terminator made for infiltration and assassination, she was not equipped to get pleasure from sex; it was just not in the program. The first time they did it, she initiated the encounter, and did it quite suddenly; he was so surprised by these completely illogical actions that he concurred mostly from curiosity, to try to see the reason and the possible changes it may bring. After a long time he still could only guess that she did these things for him, for his satisfaction, and started that first encounter to please him. But before this day, having receiving a clear signal of disapproval, she always got the message and backed off. And a good thing that was, too - after a prolonged time with him she knew exactly what buttons to push, if needed. Now, however, she was ignoring that and advancing further: why? What happened today that changed it, and just when he thought he understood her reasoning? *She really is one of a kind*. He would have to think about it, but for now his body readily responded to her advance, and after a relatively short bliss he had to admit it felt great – maybe it would even starve the pain for a bit. Still, she had things to do, and under his stern eye she giggled like a schoolgirl and sprinted out of bed, starting to put on her underwear and giving him a show.

He needed that. He is without pain now; good. He will need that in the afternoon as well; he doesn't know it yet. I will have to modify my plans.

As she went to the bathroom to pretty herself up, John unexpectedly found himself wondering about her lingerie. *Where the hell is it coming from?* He was not an expert, but it looked expensive and even before the war probably cost a lot; post-Judgement day the things were literally priceless, useless for everyday survival and unheard of by the majority of women, who had no need for them and few means to find them. Cameron, however, owned a lot of different sets and updated her collection fairly often. The most amazing part was, when he made inquiries, both Cameron and bunker staff swore that this stuff was regularly and voluntarily sent from the frontlines. Yeah, right, as if grunts on the frontline, who hadn't bathed properly since the bombs fell, just happened to encounter pristine shopping malls and unlooted Amazon basements, carefully collect the thongs and bras and send them to their Good Ol' Commander, knowing he would appreciate this. Oh yes, and do that every month or so. More likely, Cameron pressed some poor officers into doing that extra work on the side. He could picture that: she advancing on poor guy, locking him into some dead end, face cold, voice threatening, him sweating profusely and promising to do everything just to get alive out of this encounter, later ordering his men to do that ridiculous task. But if so, she did it with an extreme cunning, since he couldn't find a single person treated that way or a witness to such encounter, and why all bunker stuff would defend her on that, he had no idea; so the mystery

remained.

Cameron emerged from the bathroom looking like a movie star, the makeup on her face bolder than usual (again deviation from the normal – what is she planning?). This was another strange thing about her – the makeup. Stuff was as rare as lacy lingerie now, and about as useful – half of all social conventions crumbled after Judgement Day, for most people clean water was a rarity which should not be squandered, and any woman who scavenged after makeup instead of something useful like food would not last long. The only women with makeup aside from Cameron that John saw were wives of the very highly placed officers, and in their case it was very obvious and quite poorly applied, just to show the fact that they owned it, the skill to apply it properly apparently lost along with a multitude of others after the War began. And yet Cameron got it somehow, applied it skillfully every day and it never seemed to bother her that she was the only one doing so. She was definitely not doing it for his sake – he would love her with all his heart if it was *her* with half of the head missing and stubble that you can sharpen knives on. The rest of the people she met were usually afraid of her on some level, so he doubted it was to impress someone else. What figures? Apparently she just liked that stuff. *Great, a vain cyborg and a cripple of a man. A match made in Heaven – or Hell.*

Cameron started dressing before the mirror, her usual outside outfit these days, dark jeans, combat boots, a long-sleeved shirt, a blazer, and thrown over that the symbol of office – a sand-colored jacket with general stars shining shoulder straps. When John recovered enough to be able to talk after his incident, the first thing he did was to gift it to her, along with all the rights that entailed. She was already trying her hand at running the Resistance, after all, continuing his mission, it was only fair for him to make that official. She was more capable than any human officer he met, and a lot more time-efficient with it, more than any human, including him. Since that day when she received the jacket from him, he hasn't seen her without that it, not even once, when she was outside his room. *She usually does a quick check, just two seconds, front and back, to see if all is fitting correctly... Ah, at least this hasn't changed.*

Living with a cyborg changes you, on a level that you may not even realize at first. Humans are wired to judge the emotional state and condition of another person based on their emotions and gestures and outward signals, but with a cyborg all that is pointless – the cyborg is in full control of all these signals at all time, showing only what she wants and when she wants it. So instead of looking for hidden meaning in her face expressions, he looked at other things, and the key turned out to be in the timetable. He learned just how long it takes her to open her eyes in the morning, to wash, to get ready, to come to him in the evening, to let him enjoy her in the night. The key was not even in the duration, but in consistency – if something is repeated from day to day, well, then apparently it serves its purpose and nothing better can be suggested at the moment. Any deviations do not happen from mistake or carelessness or desire to try something new or even a simple lack of proper internal timer, like it may be with humans – there is a reason for every break of the routine. This morning was full of deviations, and behind every one of them there is a meaning. John would have to see if tomorrow she will continue the pattern laid today, or return to an established routine, or tries something else entirely – and there would a meaning behind all that too. A cyborg never does anything that is not logical.

Having judged herself sufficiently prepared, Cameron began walking towards the room exit, but paused at the door and turned to give John a smile. *That also didn't change.*

"Go get 'em, tiger!" He said to encourage her. The day would be busy, and she was not as late as he was afraid of. She nodded and left his abode, two heavy doors shutting behind her.

He was in pain, and he lied about it. His pain puts him in danger. He lied to me today about pain. His lie put him in danger. I must protect him from danger. I must make sure he doesn't lie to me again so he doesn't put himself in danger again.

This is my fault too. He can lie about pain because he is in pain. He is in pain because I failed then. His pain puts him in danger. He is in danger because I failed then. He suffers now because of me. I must make sure he is not in danger again. I must make sure I do not fail him again. Never again.

John looked at her back with a slightly sad smile as she left. When she was out, he began wondering how many seconds – or would that be fractions of a second? - would her smile last as she stepped out of his room. He could see clearly that she was happy only when she was here, with him, never outside – why? She subtly tried to keep him in this room ever since his incident, tucked away safely from all the danger of the world, but she was not always like this. It couldn't be that he's her mission – that was present from the start, and she didn't act back then like she acted now, she had other interests and desires besides him, studying the world which was unfamiliar to her. What has changed her so much, so subtly that he didn't even notice it? She seemed to love him beyond the parameters of her mission, beyond what should be possible, devoting everything she did to him. He also loved her with all his heart, he didn't realize before how much he could love her, he *needed* her, he couldn't have survived that shot without her, but the War was more important than his or her feelings. John felt that if he ever hoped to get out of this room (for she would likely not allow him to go outside and endanger himself once again) and return to active command without breaking her or her love, then he had to be smart. He had to understand her, to find out a reason as to why she was doing it. For a cyborg never does anything that is not logical, and living with cyborgs changes you, on a level that you may not even realize at first - as John Connor, leader of the Human Resistance, General of the united human army and a man hopelessly in love with a reprogrammed cybernetic organism, knew better than anyone else.

Chapter 3: The Exchange

Disclaimer: This is another attempt at showing the atmosphere and feel of the future from which Jesse and Cameron hail out in the show, the one in which John Connor is widely perceived as a distant leader who trusts machines more than humans, with Cameron his closest confidant. It is best to read this one after my another snippets, "A cyborg's memory" and "Tin morning". This snippet illuminates a subset of Resistance economy which is not often explored in movies or show, and for me it is an experiment with a different mood than my other ones. Feedback still welcome.

Now, onto the text:

Derek Reese looked into a scope of his sniper rifle and carefully assessed the surroundings. He and his squad came here, to unremarkable rubble in what some decades ago was L.A., for an exchange with another Resistance group. Food from their side, "something interesting" (like his contact said) from another. Derek did find the vagueness a little strange, but the contact was pretty excited, swore that it was a very good deal, and he didn't let him down before, so after a moment of hesitation Derek agreed. Still, you can never be too careful, especially considering where they were and when – the deal was supposed to go shortly before the sunrise, quite the dangerous time, when all normal people scrambled for the shelters before the machines rose. They couldn't wait for the other group too long, and an ambush here would be devastating for them.

Derek moved his head to a side and inspected his troops; all in position, all ready and waiting. He heard a sound from the other side and immediately shifted his attention to it, as did the others. He saw what looked like a bald black guy advancing cautiously from behind a rubble that was on the opposite side of the street from them. He noticed Derek, raised his hand and waived to him. He fit the description of the one Derek was supposed to be meeting, but it never hurt to be careful. Derek nodded, but didn't move. He raised one hand so that the guy would see and gestured to him, keeping all his fingers except the thumb on one side and his thumb on the other side, bringing both sides towards each other and then away, imitating the dog barking. The guy nodded and gave an order to someone behind him; forward came a dog, quite ordinary looking, whom the baldy petted and then let it sniff his hand, which the dog licked. He then looked back at Derek and repeated Derek's gesture. Derek shook his head, gave a signal to his squad and carefully came forward, lowering his weapon and approaching the dog, feeling the guns of baldy's squad pointed at his chest. The canine growled at an unfamiliar person, but didn't barked like she did when she sensed walking metal, and when Derek carefully put his hand forward she inspected it with an apparent disinterest.

Both groups having determined that the other side was human, the tension dropped considerably and the rest of the squads came forward to their leaders. The bald one extended him his hand: "I'm Harris."

"Derek," Reese shook his hand, "You got the goods?"

"Yeah, it's all here." Harris gave an order to his team and they brought forth a travel bag and carefully set it on the pavement.

"What is it?" Derek asked, doubt stirring in his mind. The bag obviously couldn't hold enough weapons or armament or supplies to make the exchange worthwhile. Either they were being screwed here, or whatever was in it was pretty valuable despite the small volume, and Derek was determined to know what it was. If his squad was going to carry some new kind of explosives or top intel plans or some kind of biological container to the Bunker, they all needed to know. *I don't like it.*

"Something for the Iron Lily," Harris patted the bag, "A present."

"A present." Derek repeated, coldness growing inside of him. "What kind of present?" In his experience, everything connected to the one referred to as "the Iron Lily" (more commonly known as General Cameron) was scary and possibly dangerous, and he saw no reasons why presents to her wouldn't be as well.

"We lucked out some time ago and found an unlooted Kiki de Montparnasse boutique; about thirty sets in total, all clean. That should last you a while." Harris explained.

"Thirty sets of what?" the name didn't mean anything to Derek, but if it was for Cameron, it was sure to be something bad, and he was determined to know what exactly it was.

"Kiki de Montparnasse is a pre-war underwear company. Lingerie. You know, thongs and shit."

"Thongs." Derek knew what was about to happen, and he didn't like it one bit. He spun around to his squad, looking around for a victim before homing in on Kate, the only one who could even remotely be interested in these girly things. "Kate, you know anything about this stuff? Can you, uh, inspect it to make sure it is all right?"

"Hell no!" Kate exhaled furiously, panic visible on her face. "I don't know anything about all that. You the boss, you touch it."

Cringing inwardly, Derek made an uncertain step towards the bag. *What the fuck did I do to deserve all of this*, he thought savagely as he heard a barely suppressed snickering behind his back.

That bastard Harris, pretending not to notice all that, opened the bag and invited Derek to explore its contents. Derek crouched down and saw a few rows of women underwear, which to him seemed to have a lot less fabric and a lot more lace than the ones he saw. He couldn't believe a woman would willingly put anything from that bag on herself. *Well, apparently one does. Of course, she is not exactly a woman.*

"Come on," Harris urged him, "Inspect it."

Derek swallowed nervously and put his shaking hand forward, then jerked it away as he thought better of it. *If there is one creature in this goddamn universe able to determine with scientific accuracy that my dirty paw touched her thong, it's her. And only one creature who could find out it was MY paw, and that's also her, and only one creature to actually come for me for that, and that creature is also her. Fuck, he was not going to risk it.* He broke into cold sweat as he imagined her coming to him, quickly turned to the squad and barked an order to find him something clean. Some shuffling later, and Kate helpfully offered him a roll of clean bandages, desperately trying not to burst out laughing. He took it gratefully, wrapped his hand in it and carefully touched the unfamiliar fabric before him; it all seemed to be here, and nothing seemed to be openly broken, beyond that he had no idea what to check. A thought emerged in his head, that despite persistent rumors about General Cameron liking that stuff and apparently receiving it in spades, she never gave any indication about what kind style or styles she actually preferred. Neither did John; Derek had no idea if he even liked those things when they were on her. *It wouldn't fucking kill anyone of them to give some well-deserved feedback to the troops*, he thought savagely. At least then he wouldn't be on his own in this situation. Still, he'd come this far, he might as well go all the way. Praying that the Skynet patrol finds them right now and ends his misery, he leaned closer to sniff at the fabric, intensifying the sniggering and suppressed laughter behind his back to unbearable levels.

"Shut it down, all of you!" he barked angrily, careful to turn his head as he screamed so that the spittle won't land on fabric, "Tomwell, Kennedy – I haven't decided who's going to be on sanitation duty after our return, you know, and I have a feeling you two would fit well." With snickering marginally quieter than before, he finished the procedure as quickly as possible and stood up, wiping the sweat from his brow with unbandaged hand, finding nothing wrong with the collection before him.

"It's all good," Harris promised him, completely unfazed about Derek's humiliation. The man must be a metal, despite his dog, to be so fucking calm in such situation. "They are clean, untouched and worn by nobody but the mannequins. My boys collected them using med gloves; they knew what they were dealing with." He leaned to Derek and whispered conspiratorially: "If you play your cards right, you can dole this stuff out for a few months straight back there at the Bunker – to her, to the girls working there, or to the top generals, they all have someone who can appreciate this; the batch here is about to get you some choice favors among top brass. Just say that it's a voluntary donation from the troops or something like this, they all say that."

An underground market in lacy lingerie, running straight at the headquarters among our top officers. Derek had a feeling he was one step closer to understanding how top brass of the Resistance worked, and he would like nothing more right now than to forget that step. He thought about it for a moment; humiliation aside, bag's content did seem like a useful asset. At the very least, they could probably bargain it with another squad. He nodded at his men, and they brought forth their side of the exchange – bags with canned food.

"Homemade, but with fabric cans; rare stuff," he said.

Harris nodded and took out a knife, opening one of the cans. The frozen meat probably didn't smell that much, but the stomach growls of his squad were so loud they should have been heard by all Skynet units nearby. *I wouldn't even mind it at this time.* Derek knew that this story of his experiences today would entertain the rest of his squad for days, and then they will be back at bunker and relay it to other squads, and those squads to another, the story mutating with each retelling and possibly outliving the Skynet itself. That's how he will go out and be left in history books – Derek Reese, the party inspector.

Having completed the inspection, Harris nodded to Derek and called his men to take the food. The inspection finally over, two groups had to go their separate ways now, and do

it quickly before the sunrise started. As two groups were moving apart, that bastard Harris shouted to Derek, once he figured out he was at the safe distance: "Thanks for exchange, enjoy the merchandise! Leave something for the Lily!" The asshole and his group disappeared then, ignoring the curses that Derek sent to their backs.

Furious Derek inspected his troops and, in a time-honored martial tradition, decided to transfer his frustration to someone of the lesser rank: "Hey Kate, you look like you are in high spirits. That's good, because *you* are dragging that bag all the way to the Bunker, and if anything happens to it, it's your fault. Thanks for the bandage, by the way. Kennedy, Tomwell – you two are still smiling, I see. I like it, we rarely see that kind of attitude when it comes to toilet cleaning; I expect you two to set an example for the other squads by your industrious work once we get back. Now let's get moving to the shelter, people, before the sun is out."

As he watched grumbling Kate close and carefully lift the bag with lingerie, Derek decided to give her another warning: "Don't touch that stuff, don't move it, definitely don't try to wear it, and if I were you, I wouldn't even breathe on it. Otherwise I can't guarantee your safety once we go back." *Or mine*, he added inwardly. Cameron could be ferocious on some days; the troops didn't call this Lily "Iron" because of her metal interior.

As they hurried across the ruins to their shelter, Derek tried to get his bearing back. Their primary mission was not exactly a stellar success, them finding no evidence of Skynet activity in this area that the recon group reported. Either the recon was mistaken or Skynet actually smarted out to them and moved its operations; none of the two possibilities were good, especially when he imagined himself reporting that to the General. He risked a glance at Kate, running behind with the priceless bag on her back. *Maybe this stuff will actually come in handy after all. And I think I just found out a person to "volunteer" it to her...*